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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3404

INFO RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 2021

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000530

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, OES/IHB, AIAG

STATE PASS TO AID

HHS FOR ASPR/OMSPH, ASPR/IO, OS

HHS PASS TO CDC

USDA PASS TO APHIS

AMMAN FOR ESTH HUB OFFICER

BAGHDAD FOR POL-MIL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/25/2019

TAGS: KFLU AEMR ASEC AMED CASC KFLO TBIO KSAF KPAO

PREL, PINR, AMGT, TF, KU

SUBJECT: KUWAIT: 18 U.S. MILITARY H1N1 CASES MADE PUBLIC;

DEFENSE MINISTRY THREATENS RESTRICTIONS; HEALTH MINISTRY

FORESTALLS PANIC

REF: A. KUWAIT 527

1B. KUWAIT 515

1C. KUWAIT 498

1D. KUWAIT 455

1E. KUWAIT 449

Classified By: DCM Alan Misenheimer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: News of 18 confirmed H1N1 cases among U.S. military personnel in Kuwait dominated newspaper headlines and TV news shows on May 24 and 25 (ref A). The Ministry of Health moved promptly to stymie panic, including holding a well-received press conference on May 24. Separately, Kuwait military officers told U.S. military counterparts that they may consider limiting the flow of U.S. troops in and out of U.S. bases in Kuwait, which would have negative consequences for U.S. military operations in Iraq. Ministry of Health officials visited Camp Buehring May 25 and voiced satisfaction with procedures in place for screening, isolating and treating cases. Post informed the Ministry May 24 of 47 new confirmed H1N1 cases among U.S. military personnel in Kuwait; the acting Health Minister has opted not to announce the new cases for the time being. End Summary.

MOH REACTS TO PREVENT PANIC

12. (C) Following publication of an article in the Fayetteville Observer May 22, citing a CENTCOM spokeswoman confirming 18 confirmed H1N1 cases among U.S. military in Kuwait, local media picked up on the story on the afternoon of May 23. The news of the 18 confirmed cases dominated local newspapers' front pages on May 24 and 25 (ref A). The Kuwait Ministry of Health moved quickly to forestall panic, issuing multiple statements on May 23 and 24 stating that Kuwait is safe from the H1N1 virus and that the isolated nature of U.S. military bases renders transfer of the virus to the local population all but impossible. These, and other reassuring statements -- including references to "transparent" coordination between GOK and USG -- were emphasized at a press conference on May 24. (Note: the Ministry's leadership is aware of the 47 new confirmed cases but acting Minister Dr. Moudhi Al-Homoud has indicated to Ambassador that she intends not to announce the new cases for the time being, given local political sensitivities. These

sensitivities were reflected in a widely circulated cartoon showing a face-masked Kuwaiti looking worriedly at Kuwait's border screening requirements for H1N1 while a smiling U.S. soldier holds a pig on a leash behind him. Post's press guidance does not mention numbers, based on the tacit understanding that the GOK will take the lead in announcing such figures. End Note).

¶13. (C) Three senior Ministry officials, accompanied by Embassy staff, visited Camp Buehring -- the location of the confirmed 18 cases -- on May 25. The officials signaled their satisfaction with procedures in place for screening, isolating and treating suspected and confirmed cases of H1N1 influenza, though they subsequently voiced concern about civilian contractors being exposed to the virus. Senior ARCENT officers facilitated and led the tour of the base's medical, intake, isolation and dining facilities. Ministry officials later told econoff that they provided a positive assessment of the visit to the Kuwait News Agency (KUNA).

MOD THREATENS TO LIMIT TROOP FLOWS

¶14. (C) Senior GOK Ministry of Defense officials told senior U.S. military officers May 25 that they may consider limiting the flow of personnel in and out of one or more U.S. military bases in Kuwait, as a means of preventing the possible spread of the H1N1 virus to the Kuwait population. (Note: Significant restrictions on U.S. troop flows in and out of Iraq via Kuwait could have damaging consequences for current and future U.S. operations in Iraq. End Note). Embassy is

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awaiting the outcome of an internal Ministry of Health meeting held May 26. Minister Al-Homoud informed Ambassador the evening of May 25 that they were contemplating next steps, such as sending Tamiflu to the bases for soldiers' use. While neither confirming nor denying other reports that the GOK was considering restricting the entry of U.S. troops, the Minister asked pointedly why troops were not being screened prior to departing the U.S. for bases overseas.

¶15. (U) On May 25, WHO formally listed Kuwait as one of 46 countries with confirmed cases of H1N1 influenza.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Obviously, any GOK decision to restrict U.S. troop flows in and through Kuwait is of immense concern. While we do not believe this draconian measure has been decided, nonetheless high-level CENTCOM engagement will go a long way toward reassuring the Kuwaiti military of our own stringent safeguards to prevent the spread of the H1N1 virus in Kuwait. Separately, we would note the Ministry of Health's prompt and responsible moves to forestall panic among citizens and residents of the first Arab country to have confirmed cases of H1N1 influenza on its soil (UAE and Bahrain have since announced confirmed cases). Coordination between Post and the Ministry of Health has been excellent throughout. Ambassador has advised Minister Al-Homoud that the GOK will need to release information about the 47 new confirmed cases in conjunction with HHS notification to the WHO. End Comment.

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JONES